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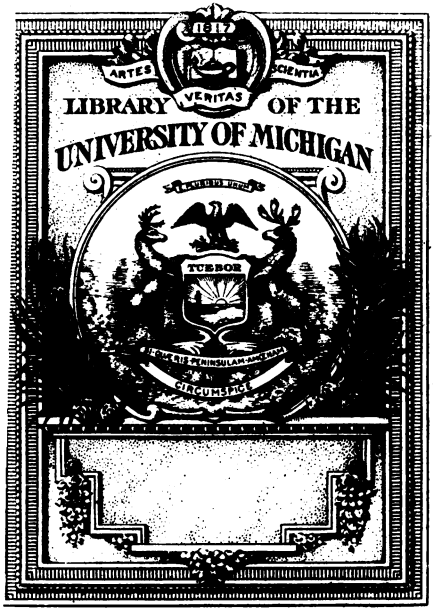

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IT'S THE POOR THAT 'ELPS THE POOR
THE AUTOCRAT OF THE COFFEE-STALL
INNOCENT AND ANNABEL

BY

HAROLD CHAPIN

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IT'S THE POOR THAT 'ELPS THE POOR

IT'S THE POOR THAT 'ELPS THE POOR

Produced at the Court Theatre, London, on March 19, 1913, with the following cast of characters :—

MRS. HARRIS . . .	*Miss Blanche Stanley.*
MR. HARRIS . . .	*Mr. Walter Hubert.*
CHARLES KING . . .	*Mr. Allan Jeayes.*
MRS. PIPE . . .	*Miss Armine Grace.*
EMILY PIPE . . .	*Miss Kathleen Russell.*
WILLIE PIPE . . .	*Mr. R. Grassdorff.*
MR. PICKARD . . .	*Mr. Sebastian Smith.*
MRS. MANLY . . .	*Miss Florence Harcourt.*
KEITY	*Miss Lisa Stecker.*
ALFRED WRIGHT . .	*Mr. Vivian Gilbert.*
WALTER WRIGHT . .	*Mr. Sibley Hicks.*
MRS. HERBERTS. . .	*Miss Calypso Valetta.*
TED	*Mr. Perceval Clark.*

IT'S THE POOR THAT 'ELPS THE POOR

SCENE.—*A living-sleeping room off King Street, Camden Town. The furniture, of the "Why-don't-you-marry-the-girl" hire-purchase variety, is comparatively new. The walls, covered with cheap but cheerful paper, harmonize with the flowered linoleum, which is only beginning to lose its decorated surface in the more-trodden places. The door is* L. *of* C. *The fire-place, with a small gas-stove standing out from it, down* R. *Against the wall opposite the fire-place is a rough—probably home-made—dresser. Against the back wall is a double bed, covered from end to end with a piece of green art serge. A small deal kitchen-table with a red-and-black cloth on it is* L. *of* C. *A cheap painted chest of drawers against wall between door and bed.*

An arm-chair of Early Victorian pattern, and in second-hand condition, is above fire, rather far out into room to avoid the gas-stove. Below the stove is another chair—a kitchen elbow-chair of varnished wood. Two Windsor chairs stand one above the table and one at its L. *end with its back to the dresser. An assortment of cheap cups, saucers, etc., are on the dresser. A few pots and pans upon the gas-stove and in the hearth.*

The curtain rises on an empty stage, but the heavy footsteps of a small procession are heard on the stairs. They hesitate outside, and a voice—a deep male

voice—with the gruffness of a street-vendor, says, as the door remains a foot open :—

THE VOICE (PICKARD) (*off*). You go in first, Kitty.

(KITTY *enters. She is generally known as* MRS. HARRIS. *She is a fat matron of fifty-five with a red face and large neck. She is dressed heavily in black, with nodding plumes in her bonnet and twinkling jet (imitation) on her cape. She is followed by her husband,* HARRIS, *the eel-vendor. In weight he is her equal, but not in depth of mourning. He wears a dark 27s. 6d. suit, a black ready-made tie; he carries a very hard bowler hat, the red imprint of which is indelibly marked upon his brow.* MR. PICKARD, *who addressed* MRS. HARRIS *as "Kitty," stands back while they enter, and remains as door-holder for the rest of the procession, who are slowly climbing the stairs.* MR. HARRIS *follows his panting wife across to the hearth, and as she sits in the smaller arm-chair he sinks with a sigh of gratification into the larger one, and places his hat between his feet.* MRS. HARRIS *leans across and remonstrates with great solemnity.*)

MRS. HARRIS. I shouldn't take that chair if I was you, father.

MR. HARRIS (*surprised*). W'y not? (*Testing the strength of the spring by several sitting jumps.*) It's all right.

MRS. HARRIS (*with reproach*). It would be only decent to leave it for Mrs. 'Erberts, pore sole!

MR. HARRIS (*abashed*). I wasn't thinkin'! (*Lifts his hat and retreats to bed, where he sits.*)

MRS. HARRIS (*more in sorrow than in anger*). No, you never do.

(*The procession has continued, and an awkward young man, wearing large yellow boots, which contrast glaringly with the sombre garments of all the rest of*

the cortège, has entered. He is a typical coster: thirty years of age, slightly tanned and hardened, grey-eyed, with close-cropped fair hair and a curled fringe almost down to his eyes. He wears a cheap dark suit and a black tie over a dicky and turned-down collar, and a dark cap, which he forbears to take off. He is followed by MRS. PIPE, *of the coal-shed, a little, puffing woman in black, who no sooner gets into the room than she collapses in a flood of tears into the chair above the table. A large, well-developed girl, entering behind her, looks at her impatiently.*)

THE GIRL. Oh, chuck it, muvver! Wot's the good of startin' again?

HER MOTHER. I can't 'elp it. Straight, I can't. It brings things into me 'ed. I've lost five, an' I knows wot it means.

(*A boy of fifteen enters. He addresses the big girl with the air of one discussing a distant phenomenon.*)

THE BOY. Muvver started again?

THE GIRL (*expressively*). Not 'arf!

MRS. HARRIS (*kindly but firmly, from her elbow-chair*). If you can't control yourself, Mrs. Pipe, it would be better if you went 'ome. You'll only upset pore dear Mrs. 'Erberts, pore sole!

THE GIRL (*shrugging hopelessly and regarding her weeping mother*). That's wot I tell 'er, Mrs. 'Arris, but she's such a one! There ain't no checking 'er.

HER MOTHER (*between sobs*). It—brings—so much—back to me. (*Loudly.*) I've buried five, Mrs. Harris.

THE GIRL (*exasperated*). Lor' love a duck! You've got eight left!

(MR. PICKARD *has meanwhile tired of acting as door-keeper and entered the room. He now observes the empty arm-chair, and crosses to it. He sits in it as the mother's sobs cease.* MRS. HARRIS *leans forward and whispers. He says "Eh?" She raises her voice.*)

MRS. HARRIS. It would be only decent to leave it for pore dear Mrs. 'Erberts, pore sole.

(MR. PICKARD *rises and goes to bed, where he sits next to* MR. HARRIS.)

(*There are now seven people in the room:* MRS. HARRIS *in the elbow-chair below fire;* MR. HARRIS *on the bed; on his* L. MR. PICKARD, *grizzly-bearded and dressed in a shabby double-breasted blue serge suit, carrying a bowler, and sporting the inevitable black tie. He is a potato salesman.* MR. KING *stands in front of the chest of drawers. The* PIPE *family are above the table.* EMILY, *the big daughter, in her large black feathered hat and purple velveteen blouse, standing on the* R. *of her diminutive mother, and* WILLY, *the son, on her* L. *They have the unintentional air of threatening her. Eighth and ninth come* MRS. MANLY *and her daughter aged eight, the widow and orphan of a deceased coster volunteer, who gave his life for his country and left his wife to live by doing half-day's charing for the wives of less patriotic mates. They are in magnificent and experienced mourning, especially the child, though hers is very small and short in the skirt for her.* MRS. MANLY *escorts her down* L. *of table, sits, and takes her on her knees.*)

MRS. MANLY. You've got to be very good, Keity, and never not so much as open your mouth. (KEITY *nods, big-eyed.* MRS. MANLY *looks around, anxious to express herself.*) P'r'aps I hadn't ought to 'a' brought 'er, but it would 'a' been crool 'ard to leave 'er be'ind.

MRS. HARRIS. Of course.

MRS. MANLY (*encouraged*). You see, she 'asn't never been to a funeral, properly speaking. 'Er father 'aving lost 'is life in Souf Africa an' 'er gran'-farver 'aving been blown up 'an pos'-mortemmed.

HARRIS. Benny Herberts 'ad a pos'-mortem on 'im, if it comes to that. It don't make no difference to the funeral.

MRS. MANLY (*with pride*). Ah, but dad—'e was pos'-mortemmed proper.

(ALFRED *and* WALTER WRIGHT, *brother costers of twenty-five or thereabouts, wearing the ubiquitous mourning garb, enter.* MRS. HARRIS *addresses them, rising.*)

MRS. HARRIS. Is she comin' up?

WALTER (*nodding*). She asked us not to wait, but to come on up. (*He moves to* L. *corner above dresser, standing between* WILLY PIPE *and the* MANLYS.)

MRS. HARRIS. You drove slow. (*Crosses to door slowly.*)

ALFRED (*moving towards the large chair*). There wasn't no 'urry. 'N' we 'ad to stop somewhere to break the luck.

PICKARD (*surprised*). Wot luck?

MRS. HARRIS (*severely*). No one never goes straight 'ome after a funeral, 'Arry. Surely you knows that much?

PICKARD (*abashed*). Of course, Kitty. I wasn't thinking.

EMILY PIPE. Take that cap o' yours off, Charlie King. Show some respeck for the living, if you can't show none for the dead with them brown boots o' yours.

KING (*guiltily*). I 'adn't got no others.

EMILY. Couldn't you 'a' borrowed some?

KING (*mournfully*). Not to wear.

(MRS. HERBERTS *appears outside the door.* MRS. HARRIS *bustles out to her and leads her in and across to the large arm-chair just as* ALFRED WRIGHT *has seated himself therein. He starts out of it guiltily, and finds refuge from* MRS. HARRIS'S *glare on the bed to the* R. *of the others.*)

MRS. HARRIS (*placing the chief mourner in the sacred chair*). There, dearie. Now don't you worry about nothing. 'Ow pale you look! 'Ow do you feel?

MRS. HERBERTS. Not ill. I—— (*She staves off approaching tears by wisely ceasing to speak, and leans back wearily. She is a fairly pretty girl of the coster type, not more than twenty-one or two years of age, wearing a black blouse and skirt and a black hat with black feathers.* MRS. HARRIS *removes this and takes it to table.*)

MRS. HARRIS (*in a business-like tone*). Willy, do you mind running out for a drop of something?

WILLY PIPE (*neither enthusiastically nor unwillingly*). No.

MRS. HARRIS. That's a good boy! (*To* WALTER WRIGHT.) Reach me them jugs, will you, Walter? (WALTER *obeys.*) 'Ere. (*She gives* WILLY *the smaller.*) A pint an'n'arf of stout. (*Gives the other.*) A quart of four-ale, and (*here she mysteriously produces a clean flask from her cash-pocket under her dress and hands it over*) 'ere, a quartern of special Scotch. Now, can you manage?

WILLY (*pocketing the flask*). Yes.

MRS. HARRIS. That's a good boy. 'Ere. (*Gives him money.*) Now look sharp.

(WILLY *departs on his errand.* MRS. MANLY *rises from her chair and proffers it.*)

MRS. MANLY. Sit 'ere, Mrs. 'Arris.

MRS. HARRIS (*complying*). Thank you, Mrs. Manly. (*To* MRS. PIPE.) You don't mind me sendin' Willy, I'm sure, Mrs. Pipe. 'E's a good boy.

MRS. PIPE. I only wishes as every mother 'ad as good a son. Some say girls is more haffectionate, but I'm sure I ain't found them so, an' wot with eight living an' five I've buried——

(*The completion of the sentence is deferred by a sharp blow in the ribs from* EMILY'S *elbow. Every one looks*

anxiously at MRS. HERBERTS, *who seems not to have heard the remark.*)

EMILY (*fiercely under her breath*). Muvver!

MRS. PIPE (*peevishly*). Wot is it?

EMILY. Can't you be more tactful? (*She indicates her meaning by a directive glance.*)

MRS. PIPE (*realizing her iniquity and accordingly offended with her daughter*). You put your elbow right into me corsets, Emily! I believe you've broke that bone I was a-tellin' you about only last night.

EMILY. Oh, shut up, muvver!

(MRS. HERBERTS *has taken out a handkerchief. The others watch her in silent apprehension. She merely blows her nose, however, and returns it to her bosom, when the silence in the room makes her look up to find all the others watching her. She smiles a little weakly, and speaks.*)

MRS. HERBERTS. You're very good to see me 'ome. Ted'll be most grateful to you all for looking after me so kind.

MRS. HARRIS (*with some pride*). That's nothing, dearie. We'd 'a' done the same for anyone.

ALFRED (*from the bed*). It's the poor wot 'elps the poor.

MRS. MANLY (*enthusiastically*). That's a true word. Ah, you've got a lot to be thankful for, Mrs. 'Erberts, dear! I only wish my poor Will could come 'ome and 'ear 'ow good every one's been to me, same as your Ted can.

MRS. HERBERTS. Gawd knows 'ow I'm going to tell 'im! 'E was that fond of the nipper; 'e fair idolized 'im!

HARRIS. 'E'll get your letter——

CHARLES KING (*quickly and with some heat*). Not till 'is sentence is up, they don't——

HARRIS (*angrily*). I know that, don't I? I'm saying 'e'll get it as soon as ever 'e comes aht.

PICKARD. That'll be a week from yesterday.

WALTER. Do they let 'em out prompt?

KING (*with increased warmth*). They jolly well 'ave to. Nice fing if they kept you after your time was up!

EMILY (*scornfully, as she goes to chair below fire and sits*). They could if they wanted to.

KING. *They—could—not!* Fourteen days is fourteen days.

MRS. MANLY. All for leavin' 'is barrer by the kerb w'ile 'e 'ad a drink with a friend!

ALFRED. 'E shouldn't 'ave 'it the p'liceman.

CHARLES KING. 'E did not 'it the p'liceman. 'E only pushed parst 'im, see? 'E'd 'a' been summonsed for leavin' 'is barrer, anyway.

MRS. PIPE. There's one law for the rich and another for the poor, that's a fact.

EMILY. Oh, shut up, muvver!

WALTER. 'E oughtn't to 'a' got fourteen days just for shovin' a p'liceman.

MRS. HERBERTS (*simply*). It was the same p'liceman wot 'e'd 'ad trouble with before.

PICKARD (*from the bed*). T't! Wot luck!

KING. Ah! 'E 'ad a down on Ted; I saw 'im —'e was simply askin' 'im to 'it 'im. Fourteen days!

HARRIS. 'E 'ad the option.

KING (*furiously*). Wot's the good o' the option to Ted? W'ere's a pore bloke wot's just bought a barrer-load o' plums to find forty bob an' costs?

EMILY. Shut up, Ginger!

MRS. HARRIS (*oil on troubled waters*). Don't get arguing *to-day*, Charlie, there's a good boy.

(*The door opens and* WILLY PIPE *returns, a jug in each hand. He deposits them on the table, standing in* EMILY'S *old place,* R. *of* MRS. PIPE. *He then produces the flask from his pocket, lays it beside them, then the change beside the flask. The company evince interest, but no enthusiasm.* MRS. HARRIS *rises and begins transplanting the stock of glasses and cups from the dresser to the table.*)

MRS. HARRIS. That's a good boy. T't! 'Ave I 'ad your chair all this time, Mrs. Manly?

MRS. MANLY (*regaining it*). It don't——

WALTER WRIGHT. There's some chairs just across the landing in Tom Adams' room.

MRS. HARRIS. I'm sure—(*he wouldn't mind us, etc.*).

WILLY PIPE (*with a burst of goodness*). I'll fetch 'em. (*Goes out.*)

MRS. HARRIS. *Wot* a good boy 'e is!

MRS. PIPE. They ses boys is more trouble, but if I was to 'ave fifty——

EMILY PIPE. Muvver!

MRS. HARRIS (*presiding*). Now (*to* MRS. HERBERTS) what do you fancy, my dear? A drop o' stout?

(MRS. HERBERTS, *taken off her guard, breaks into pitiful sobs and attempts to cover her face with her hands.* MRS. HARRIS, *officious but kindly, hurries round the table to her.*)

MRS. HARRIS. There, there, dearie! Don't give way like that. Wot ever is it?

(*It is some seconds before* MRS. HERBERTS *can control herself sufficiently to explain.*)

MRS. HERBERTS. Baby was that fond o' the smell o' a drop o' stout! Many's the time me an' Ted's let 'im 'ave a sniff at a glass—an' 'e used to laugh that pretty when the froth got up 'is nose. It used to make Ted laugh, too, an' now—— Ow, Gawd! (*and she leans against the edge of the chair-back and weeps unrestrainedly. The men look on in awkward sympathy.* MRS. PIPE *weeps silently.* MRS. MANLY *sniffs, and the child looks on wide-eyed. Only* CHARLIE KING *keeps his more human feelings in check by a glow of prejudice.*)

CHARLES KING. I 'ope you never gave 'im none.

MRS. HERBERTS. Ted wouldn't let me; 'e was that faddy about baby.

CHARLES KING (*warmly approving*). Quite right. Why, it might 'ave started the taste in 'im!

MRS. HERBERTS (*hopelessly*). Wot does it matter wot it might 'ave done? 'E's dead wiv all our faddin'.

CHARLES KING (*lacking the sense to stop, though realizing his blunder*). Yes, but—you wouldn't like to fink——

EMILY PIPE (*rising and picking up* MRS. HERBERT'S *dropped handkerchief, and thereby interposing between her and* KING, *who is roughly* C.). Shut up, Charlie King—arguing!

(*The return of* WILLY PIPE *laden with two chairs breaks up the situation.*)

MRS. HARRIS (*who has returned to her task of pouring out at the table*). There's a good boy. Now we can all sit down. Charlie—— (*indicates the two jugs*).

CHARLES KING. 'Arf-an'-'arf, fanx. (*Takes glass and goes with it to foot of bed, where he sits.*)

(WALTER *remains unseated, lounging against the dresser above table,* L. *of* MRS. PIPE. MRS. MANLY, *who has resumed her chair, takes her orphan daughter on her lap.* WILLY *places one chair* C.*—that is, to* R. *of table—and the other above table* R. *of his mother. On this chair he himself sits, and produces from his pocket a bottle of ginger-beer.*)

MRS. HARRIS (*handing him a glass*). Still Band of 'Ope, Willy?

(WILLY *does not deign to reply.*)

MRS. HARRIS (*knowing tastes, she only offers what will be accepted*). Walter!

WALTER WRIGHT. Fanx. (*Receives his drink.*)

MRS. HARRIS (*unscrewing the flask*). You'll take whisky, I know, 'Arry.

(PICKARD *nods.*)

MRS. HARRIS (*pouring out some and adding water*

from dresser). Take Mr. Pickard that, will you, Willy? (*To* HARRIS.) Farver?

MRS. HERBERTS. Let me help. (*She rises and meets* WILLY, C., *where she takes his glass on to* MR. PICKARD, *and returns to table for* HARRIS'S.)

MRS. HARRIS (*protesting*). No, no, dearie. You set still.

MRS. HERBERTS. I'd rather be doing something. (*Takes* HARRIS *his glass.*)

HARRIS (*raising it as he receives it*). Thank you, my dear. Good luck!

(*The company is horrified.*)

MRS. HARRIS. Farver, I'm surprised at you!

HARRIS (*surprised*). I only said "Good luck!"

MRS. HARRIS (*severely*). I'd 'a' thought you'd 'a' 'ad more feeling!

HARRIS (*abashed, but defending himself*). I meant—better luck next time.

MRS. HARRIS (*more in sorrow than in anger*). I suppose it's no use, farver, for me to ask you to mind wot you're saying of.

MRS. HERBERTS (*who has moved through this, quite unheeding it, and is now lifting a glass at the table*). Is this for Alf?

MRS. HARRIS. Yes; an' this here is yours, dearie—you really ought to take a drop o' something.

MRS. HERBERTS. All right. (*She takes the two glasses, carries one to* ALFRED WRIGHT *on the far end of the bed, and goes with the other to below fire, where she sits. The large arm-chair is empty, and* EMILY PIPE *is standing up,* C.)

MRS. HERBERTS (*touching the arm-chair*). Sit 'ere, Emily.

EMILY. It's your chair.

MRS. HERBERTS. I'm quite comf'table w'ere I am. Do 'ave it.

(EMILY *obeys.*)

CHARLES KING (*rising from the foot of the bed with*

an inspiration). I know a toast is rarver out of place, but 'ere's one as no one can't take exception to. (*With feeling.*) Absent friends!

(*The company is favourably impressed, and the glasses raised to a discreet chorus of muttered* "'Ere, 'eres!" *and repetitions of the toast,* MRS. PIPE, *trying to add something about* "An' may they soon——" *but giving it up as the glass reaches her lips.*)

MRS. HERBERTS (*after the others*). Thank you, Charlie.

MRS. HARRIS (*across the room*). Finished your drop o' whisky, farver?

(HARRIS *nods.*)

MRS. HARRIS (*suggestively*). Then don't you think——

HARRIS (*suddenly understanding*). Oh, ah! (*Rises and makes for the door, where he pauses.*) You was coming with me, Pickard, wasn't you?

(PICKARD *rises.*)

MRS. HERBERTS. You're not going, Mr. 'Arris?

MRS. HARRIS. 'E's just got someing 'e's got to see to. 'E'll come back, won't you, farver?

HARRIS (*with surprising emphasis*). Not 'arf! (*Goes out, followed by* PICKARD, *who closes door cautiously behind him.*)

(*The orphan* MANLY *suddenly tunes up.*)

KEITY. Wot's Mr. 'Arris gone for, mummy?

MRS. MANLY. 'Ush, Keity! I told you as 'ow——

KEITY (*still more loudly*). 'E winked——

MRS. MANLY (*shaking her severely*). I told you to 'ush, miss!

(*The child is subdued.*)

MRS. PIPE (*making conversation in the pause that follows*). It's been a lovely day for it.

MRS. HARRIS. I never see such weather! Not a drop o' rain since last Tuesday week—an' wot a Bank 'Oliday!

ALFRED. I could 'a' done wiv a drop o' rain, it lays the dust.

MRS. HARRIS (*to* MRS. HERBERTS). We missed you, my dear. It was only just about four o'clock when I ses to farver, "I wonder 'ow Ted 'Erberts's spending *'is* Bank 'Oliday, pore feller!"

MRS. MANLY. Four o'clock?

MRS. HARRIS. Yes, an'——

MRS. MANLY (*greatly impressed*). W'y, that was just w'en Benny died, wasn't it—four o'clock?

MRS. HERBERTS. No.

MRS. MANLY (*checked*). I fought you said——

MRS. HERBERTS. 'E was breaving when I went round to try an' find the doctor. That was nigh on five.

MRS. MANLY. Well, 'e must 'a'——

(*There is a quick clatter of feet outside, and a young coster enters. He is well into the room before he realizes that there are many people round him. Then he stops, vaguely thrown out of his bearings by their presence.* MRS. HERBERTS *rises in surprise, as do the others without exception.*)

MRS. HERBERTS. Ted!

TED (*staring round*). Wot——

CHARLES KING (*recovering first from the general surprise*). Ted, ol' man, wot O! Aht before yer time? (*He attempts to seize* TED'S *hand.*)

TED. Wot are you all doing 'ere?

MRS. HARRIS. We're a-keepin' of 'er company after the funeral.

TED (*understanding*). He's buried, then?

(*A universal nod.*)

TED (*more impressed than grief-stricken*). Buried, Gawd's truth! An' las' week 'e was as 'ealthy——

MRS. HARRIS (*consolingly*). 'E 'ad a cough, Ted.

TED (*furiously*). 'Ad a cough? 'E died 'ungry! It was in the papers. The bloomin' 'Ome Sekeratery 'ad me let out bekos of it. They came an' told me in me cell—died o' negleck an' starvation! Coroner's verdick, "lack o' nourishment." Couldn't you do nothing for 'im, Lil?

MRS. HERBERTS. Ted, I did all I could.

TED. 'N' 'e died 'ungry! Couldn't you feed 'im?

MRS. HERBERTS. Ted, I 'adn't got nothin' in the place.

TED. Couldn't you get nothin'? Wouldn't nobody give you nothin'?

MRS. HERBERTS. They was all away. It was Bank 'Oliday, Ted. I ran short.

TED. Ran short! Fine, ain't it? An' 'e died o' negleck!

MRS. HARRIS (*with some asperity*). No, 'e didn't, Ted Herberts. Death *haxcellerated* by negleck was the——

TED. 'Cellerated be damned! (*To his wife.*) Do you mean to say as you 'adn't nothin'—nothin'? W'y—'adn't you bought nothin' in?

MRS. HERBERTS. 'Ow could I buy anything in, Ted? I 'adn't got no money. I'd pawned me bes' blouse 'n'——

TED. Wouldn't nobody lend you nothing?

MRS. HERBERTS (*with sweet reasonableness*). They couldn't be expected to keep on, Ted.

TED. Moi Gawd! (*To others fiercely*). You let Benny die, you——

MRS. HERBERTS. It was all through it being Bank 'Oliday, Ted, an' every one that busy on Saturday. 'E 'ad 'is cough, Ted. I didn't know w'ich way to turn, straight I didn't! Charlie King, 'e lent me 'arf a crahn, but I got Benny's med'cin' 'n' advice wi' that. I counted on Mrs. 'Arris, an' she couldn't oblige me.

TED (*turning on* MRS. HARRIS). You——

MRS. HERBERTS. Oh, but she 'ad before, Ted, straight she 'ad; 'n' she's been that good ever since. So's everybody. I'm sure the funeral must 'a' cost poun's an' poun's, an' Mr. 'Arris an' Mr. Pickard an' Walter an' Alfred 'ave paid for it, every penny.

TED. Paid for it! That's good! Paid for 'is funeral! You couldn't 'ave lent me the money to keep me out an' workin' for 'im, could you? You couldn't lend Lil 'ere the money to feed 'im while I was in prison? Call yourself pals! I don't.

MRS. HARRIS. Thank you.

TED. Ah! "Thank you!" When I come to your 'usband to arst 'im to lend me a thick 'un t'wards me fine, 'e laughed fit to kill 'isself. Yus! An' ol' Pickard sed as 'ow fines didn't ought to be paid.

CHARLES KING. I lent you ten bob.

TED. So you did, ol' pal, an' I 'ad it put away for me in prison w'ile—— Oh, Gawd! if you'd sent to the Governor, Lil.

MRS. HERBERTS. I didn't know w'ich way to turn, Ted, straight I didn't. The plums wot you'd bought went bad wiv keepin', an'—— It took me all of a sudden——

MRS. HARRIS (*with some feeling*). You ain't doin' no good roundin' on the pore young thing like that, Ted 'Erberts. You ought to be a-comfortin' of 'er, not——

TED. You mind your own business.

FEMININE CHORUS. Well!

TED (*generally*). Yus! "Well!" An' get outside my room, the 'ole blooming lot o' you!

MRS. HARRIS (*rather finely*). I'm sure I've no wish——

MRS. PIPE (*rising*). Thank you for your gratitude, Ted 'Erberts!

EMILY. Shut up, muvver!

CHARLES KING (*coming down* L. *of* TED). Look 'ere, ol' Ted. (*His tone is one of brotherly remonstrance.*) I don't think as you ought to rahnd on them as 'as

done all they could for you, an' spent good money on 'avin' the little chap buried, an' all.

TED. I know you've done your best, ol' pal.

MRS. PIPE. An' *we* 'aven't? Thank you!

CHARLES KING (*kindly*). No one can't blame you for being upset.

(*The scene is once more interrupted, this time by the entrance of* HARRIS *and* PICKARD, *bearing between them a picture-frame of à couple of feet square, or thereabouts, wrapped in flimsy paper.*)

HARRIS (*seeing the master of the house*). Wot, Ted!

PICKARD (*with similar cordiality*). Out before your time?

TED (*not responding*). Looks like it. Wot do you want?

HARRIS. We've got something 'ere for you an' Mrs. 'Erberts, Ted. We was going to—— (*He plucks off the paper, revealing a cheap enlargement of a photograph of an anæmic-looking infant some six to eight months old.*) There! Ain't it like 'im? (*His pride is great.*)

(MRS. HERBERTS *regards the photograph with intense admiration, of which an exclamation of* "Ow!" *is the culminating point.* TED *is only mystified by its sudden appearance.*)

TED. W'ere d'you get it?

HARRIS (*proudly*). We 'ad it done as a little surprise for you. We passed the 'at round among——

TED (*calmly and slowly*). Moi Gawd! If this ain't the limit! You—— (*His rising passion suddenly finds vent in a whirl of the arm, with which he snatches the picture and flings it against the door.*) Take the bloody thing away!

(*His wife gives a genuine cry of pain and reproach.*)

MRS. HERBERTS. Oh, Ted! Benny's photograrf! An' w'en they've all been so kind to us!

(*The reproach in her voice pulls him up strangely. He stares wildly about him. On every face is the expression of genuine commiseration—though not of appreciation of this outburst. They are all still and uncomfortable. He looks last at his wife; a sob chokes him; he puts out a hand to recover the picture, then changes his mind and flings himself on his knees with his face in his wife's lap, sobbing. There is a chorus of pitying approval from the others,* MRS. HARRIS *being loud in expressing the general opinion that—*

Anyone might be'ave a bit queer wot's been through all wot 'e 'as.

Which not only proves that it's the poor who help the poor, but that they understand and can make allowances for each other's occasional bursts of ingratitude.)

CURTAIN.

THE AUTOCRAT OF THE COFFEE-STALL

THE AUTOCRAT OF THE COFFEE-STALL

Produced at the Glasgow Repertory Theatre on April 27, 1911, with the following cast of characters :—

THE COFFEE-STALL KEEPER	*Mr. Cyril Griffiths.*
BERT	*Mr. Charles Francis.*
SAM	*Mr. Edmond Breon.*
A COCKNEY HUMORIST .	*Mr. George Tawde.*
THE AUTOCRAT . . .	*Mr. Campbell Gullan.*
A RESERVIST . . .	*Mr. Harold Chapin.*

THE AUTOCRAT OF THE COFFEE-STALL

SCENE.—*A large, well-equipped coffee-stall at the corner of a wide thoroughfare near Victoria. Midnight in November.*

There are three men at the counter. Two—of the street fruit-seller, or Covent Garden Porter, type—are at one end, and another—a bowler-hatted and shabby-coated little man with a wan face and a large nose—is cracking the shell of a hard-boiled egg at the other.

The coffee-stall keeper is drawing a cup of coffee from the well-polished urn. He is a stout well-to-do man of his class, with clean white shirt sleeves rolled above his elbows, and a capacious red waistcoat decorated with a large watch and chain. His hair is dark and short and well-oiled down, and his cheeks and forehead are large and also highly polished. He places the coffee before one of his customers.

KEEPER. There y'are, Bert. Now you're satisfied.

(*The man addressed takes the cup. He is a surly-looking man with a chewed moustache and an air of general dissatisfaction.*)

BERT (*with sarcasm*). Am I?

KEEPER. Wot do you mean by "Am I"? You blooming well ought to be.

BERT (*in the same tone*). Ought I?

KEEPER. Yus, you ought. You've got what you asked for.

BERT. 'Ave I?

KEEPER (*incensed*). Yus, you *'ave.*

BERT (*making his point finely*). No, I *'aven't.* I arst you for *two sardines.*

KEEPER (*with great firmness*). I'm not goin' to open another box of sardines to-night, my lad, so don't you think it.

(BERT *grumbles to his companion over his coffee. The* SMALL MAN *hails the* KEEPER *in a high tone of scientific inquiry.*)

SMALL MAN. Guv'nor, what *is* this you've gimme?

KEEPER (*warningly, without moving*). That? That's an egg. What did you think it was?

SMALL MAN. Oh, I thought it was an egg, too, w'en I see it in the distance. But it ses otherwise!

KEEPER (*nettled*). What d'you mean?

SMALL MAN (*with sweet seriousness*). It's been singing me a little 'ymn wot I 'aven't 'eard since I was a nipper.

KEEPER. None o' your larks. Give it 'ere. (*Moves to* SMALL MAN'S *end of stall.*)

SMALL MAN (*addressing egg*). Go to poppa. (*Looking up.*) It ses you're a nasty cruel man, and it doesn't want to leave me.

KEEPER. If you've any complaint to make, 'and it over.

SMALL MAN. It's the egg wot's doing the complaining. (*Passes egg.*)

KEEPER (*after sniffing at the egg in the professional manner; with the utmost conviction*). That's a perfectly good egg.

SMALL MAN. You surprise me.

KEEPER (*nettled*). Look 'ere——

SMALL MAN (*continuing seriously*). Just shows yer 'ow 'ard it is to judge, doesn't it?

(*The* KEEPER *takes another egg from the shelf and puts it down on the counter with considerable dignity.*)

KEEPER. There. (*Putting offending egg aside.*) I'll eat it myself, w'en I gets 'ungry.

SMALL MAN. You'll 'ave to be *very* 'ungry.

(*The* KEEPER *dashes ponderously through the stall door —in pursuit of the humorist, who dodges away to a safe distance.*)

SMALL MAN (*dancing about*). Daddy can't catch me. (*He knocks into* BERT.)

BERT (*angrily*). 'Ere. Don't come bargin' into me.

SMALL MAN. Sorry.

(*The* KEEPER *gives up the chase and re-enters his stall in response to a rapping on the counter by* BERT. *The* SMALL MAN *returns to his end of the counter.*)

BERT. Chuck playin' wi' the kid, and gi's a bit o' seed cake.

(*The* KEEPER *complies. A man paces slowly along pavement towards stall. He is a tall, thin man, in a long, dirty, tweed great-coat, with an exceedingly dirty white muffler around his neck. He wears a tweed travelling cap with the ear-flaps tied up on top, and a peak behind as well as in front. His hands are deep in his pockets, from one of which a whangee cane— very bent and ragged at the end—sticks up. He looks about fifty-five to sixty years of age, and wears a ragged sandy and grey military moustache of rather generous dimensions. His clothes, though very shabby and dirty, are well made, and his boots are good. He walks slowly and very erect, with the leisured air of an officer going the rounds. The customers at the coffee-stall are apprised of his approach by the* SMALL MAN.)

SMALL MAN. 'Ere 'e is.

(BERT *and his friend turn, and all three involuntarily draw themselves up and lower their voices. The*

new-comer stops about a yard from the stall and nods to them. His manner is intensely autocratic.)

KEEPER (*with the polite familiarity of a good waiter*). Breakfast, sir ?

(*The* AUTOCRAT *moves to the centre of the counter and rests his arm against it.*)

AUTOCRAT. Thank ye.

(*He speaks in a gruff, measured voice, with a certain huskiness and rattle which occasionally develops into a fit of coughing. His nationality is unmistakably Scottish.*)

BERT (*whispering to his friend*). Always calls it 'is breakfast. Don't believe 'e gets up till nigh on midnight.

(BERT'S *friend*—SAM *by name*—*gazes at the* AUTOCRAT'S *back with great interest.*)

SAM. Gow on !
BERT. Fact.

(*The* AUTOCRAT *stands waiting quietly for his coffee, unconscious of their existence. The* SMALL MAN *plucks up courage to address him.*)

SMALL MAN (*with great courtesy*). Can I offer you a cigarette ?

AUTOCRAT (*taking a woodbine from the packet held out to him.*) Thank ye. (*His coffee is placed before him.*) I'll trouble ye for a match.

KEEPER (*supplying match smartly*). Anything to eat, sir ?

AUTOCRAT (*after lighting cigarette slowly*). Aye, I'll take a sardine an' some bread and butter.

KEEPER (*rapidly producing tin and tin-opener and talking briskly*). Right, sir.

BERT (*annoyed*). 'Ullo ! I thought you wouldn't open another box to-night.

KEEPER (*quietly*). I've changed me mind.

BERT. I notice you wouldn't do it to oblige *me*——

KEEPER (*bending back lid of tin*). I'm obliging meself. You can 'ave some now if you like.

BERT. Can I? After me seed cake? (*With sarcasm.*) Thanks.

(*The* KEEPER *serves the* AUTOCRAT'S *sardine and bread and butter.*)

AUTOCRAT. What's the matter?

KEEPER. Nothin', sir. I sed something about not opening another box to-night—just by way of a joke.

AUTOCRAT (*seriously*). A joke?

KEEPER. Yes.

AUTOCRAT (*grimly*). Well, mebbe I'm deficient in humour. (*Dissecting his sardine methodically.*) I'm obliged to ye for opening a tin for me—especially as I'm not going to pay ye the nicht.

KEEPER. Oh, that's all right, sir.

(*The* AUTOCRAT *continues eating and smoking alternately.*)

BERT (*to his friend*). 'Ear that, Sam?

SAM. Wot?

(BERT *indicates the* AUTOCRAT *with a gesture of the head and whispers into* SAM'S *ear.*)

SAM. Gow on!

KEEPER. I'm glad to see you eatin' again, sir.

AUTOCRAT. Aye. My appetite's not been very guid lately.

KEEPER. Your cough don't seem to get any worse.

AUTOCRAT. I'm doubtful if it could. (*Chuckles grimly.*)

KEEPER. We must hope for a short winter.

SMALL MAN (*entering conversation*). We can't grumble at to-night, sir.

AUTOCRAT. I'm not likely to grumble.

SMALL MAN. You gets it pretty cold in Scotland, I suppose, sir.

AUTOCRAT. In Scotland? Oh, aye. (*With a twinkle.*) What makes ye mention Scotland, now?

SMALL MAN (*very nervously*). I—thought per'aps—you might 'a' been there, sir.

AUTOCRAT (*chuckling*). You couldn't by any chance have guessed I was Scottish?

SMALL MAN (*slightly reassured*). Well, I thought it just possible you might be, sir.

AUTOCRAT. Just possible? Aye, it's just possible I am. Ye'd not take me for anything else but Scottish, now would ye?

SMALL MAN. Not easily, sir.

AUTOCRAT. Thank ye. (*Shakes him seriously by the hand.*)

KEEPER. Been norf lately, sir?

AUTOCRAT (*quietly*). Not for twenty years—except for ten days before the war.

SMALL MAN. The last war, sir?

AUTOCRAT (*catching up the phrase bitterly*). The last war? Aye, the last war I'll ever see.

BERT (*chiming in*). Ah! That's what they all say.

AUTOCRAT (*turning sharply*). That's what who all say, may I ask, sir?

BERT. Pretty well all the chaps what was in it. I know a few.

SAM. So do I. My brother-in-law, what works at the Standard—'e ses as old England can get along wivout 'im next time.

AUTOCRAT. Then he's a coward, sir. We may grumble, but if the word came—we'd go out again to-morrow.

SAM. Oh, rats!

AUTOCRAT (*dangerously*). What did you say to me, sir?

SAM. I said rats.

AUTOCRAT (*rating him soundly and effectively*).

You're an ill-bred young pup, sir! A dirty young pup, sir! Wash your neck, sir! Put your feet down flat on the ground, sir! Shave that moss off your lip, sir, and try to grow a moustache, and don't presume to address me again until you have learnt to be civil.

SAM (*crushed and amazed*). Gawd's truth!

AUTOCRAT (*turning his back squarely upon him and resuming his conversation with the startled* SMALL MAN). What were we talking about?

(*The* SMALL MAN *stammers for a moment over the reply.*)

SAM (*aside to* BERT). Did you ever 'ear anything like 'im?

BERT. Shut up and——

SMALL MAN (*still quailing under the* AUTOCRAT'S *gaze*). Scotland, I think, sir.

AUTOCRAT. Oh, aye!

KEEPER (*trying to regain calm*). It's a fine country, sir. Glasgow's a fine city. I've got some picture post-cards of it. It's a rising city.

AUTOCRAT (*coldly*). Aye, so I've heard—commercially.

KEEPER. You don't 'appen to 'ave been there?

AUTOCRAT. No.

SMALL MAN. It's a great *Liberal* country, ain't it, sir?

AUTOCRAT. The world's all Liberal these days. Too liberal—to its enemies.

BERT (*aggressively*). Oh? Oo told you so?

AUTOCRAT (*turning again*). I beg your pardon?

BERT. Oo told you as we was too Liberal to our enemies?

KEEPER. I don't want no politics 'ere, so——

BERT. Well, 'e began it.

AUTOCRAT. I didn't think my remark was addressed to you, but I'll tell ye. The war told me.

BERT (*under his breath*). Good old war!

KEEPER (*hastening to cover* BERT'S *remark*). You'll mean the Boer War, sir?

AUTOCRAT. Aye. Ye've mebbe heard me say that I was through it.

KEEPER (*as before*). You may 'ave 'appened to mention it, sir.

AUTOCRAT. Well, gentlemen. The Boer War. What was it?

BERT. A bloomin' expense.

SMALL MAN. 'Ear! 'Ear!

AUTOCRAT. Ye're richt, sir! An' why? Because it was conducted on Liberal principles.

SAM. There was a Conservative Gover'ment——

AUTOCRAT. I'm not talking of Governments, or Parties, sir. The world's a' Liberal, these days. Whiggish, if ye know the meaning of the word. Saft, and orderly, and civil.

SMALL MAN. I don't see much 'arm in bein' civil.

AUTOCRAT. Ye don't, eh?

SMALL MAN. No. It's saved me many a 'ot nose.

AUTOCRAT (*scornfully*). Perhaps you love the police for the same reason.

SMALL MAN. What 'ave the police got to do with civility?

AUTOCRAT. They are the civil authorities, are they not? They keep men saft and orderly.

SMALL MAN (*meekly*). I'm afraid I don't quite follow you.

AUTOCRAT. I say the police are the civil authority, aren't they?

SMALL MAN. Not to me.

AUTOCRAT. Ye're mixing up civility and courtesy, my friend. They're not the same thing. You can take it from me the police constitute the civil authority.

SMALL MAN (*unconvinced*). All right.

AUTOCRAT. And what is Liberalism based on?

SMALL MAN (*completely nonplussed*). Gawd knows.

AUTOCRAT. I'll tell ye, sir. It's based on civil

authority, which means that any little whippersnapper can call himself my equal an' run to a policeman when I set oot to prove to him he's not! Liberalism is Policemanism. (*Launching forth.*) What did I ask ye first? I asked ye: What was the Boer War? I'll tell ye the answer. It was a policeman's war. We weren't sent out as fighters to show the Boers who were right, but as policemen to round them up and keep them in order and see that they behaved themselves—and as soon as they'd promised —bound themselves over—to do so, we came away home again and asked for our pay. We were policemen! Aye, and we had other policemen over us to see that we—— (*His excited speech terminates in a burst of uncontrollable coughing, during which the others keep an uncomfortable silence.*)

SMALL MAN. After all, you know, sir, war is only telling the other chap to toe the line, and if he doesn't bloomin' well makin' him.

AUTOCRAT. Ye're wrong, sir! War is Nature's plan for making men and nations great by giving life to the strong, and death to the weak.

BERT (*shocked*). 'Struth.

AUTOCRAT. Yes, sir. But there'll be no more war. Ye can't get war from paid troops. Policemen, that's all they are. Our ancestors made war, sir. They fought for spoils. The spoils to the strong. That's part of the plan. Every man in an invading force provides for himself from the country. If he provides well, so much the better for himself, and so much the worse for the country. That would be war, sir. Prosecuted with all the vigour of man.

BERT. You'd be prosecuted if you tried it.

AUTOCRAT (*fiercely*). What did you say, sir?

KEEPER (*gently*). Quarter past twelve.

AUTOCRAT (*brought to earth*). Thank ye. (*Drains coffee cup.*) Disgraceful, closing pubs in a free country. (*Strides off hastily.*)

(*There is a moment's pause after he has left. Then the* SMALL MAN, *catching the* KEEPER'S *eye, voices the general sentiment.*)

SMALL MAN. 'E's a rum 'un, ain't 'e ?

KEEPER. 'E's all right. Bit nutty, that's all.

BERT (*angrily*). Bit nutty ? 'E's bloomin' well up the pole in a sailor suit, an' can't get down for splinters.

SAM. Oo is 'e ?

BERT. Wot ? A'ven't you never met 'im before ?

SAM. Not that I knows of.

BERT (*ironically*). Oh, 'e's quite one o' the sights. W'ere d's'e live, George ?

KEEPER. Down Millbank—w'ere they're pulling the old 'ouses down. 'E comes along 'ere every night about this time an' 'as a bite. Calls it 'is breakfast.

SMALL MAN. Doesn't seem to ever 'ave anything else much, does 'e ?

KEEPER. 'E goes an' 'as a drop at the "Crown" before they close.

BERT (*nastily*). Wot I want to know is : 'Ow 'e can go gargling at the "Crown" w'en 'e can't afford to pay you for 'is cawfee ?

KEEPER. 'E must put aside something for it. Poor old chap, it don't take much to make 'im tuppence-on-the-can. I think 'is 'ead's a bit weak.

SMALL MAN (*in dreamy parenthesis*). Must be a great savin', 'avin' a weak 'ead.

SAM. Old soldier, ain't 'e ?

BERT. In 'is mind.

SAM. Ain't 'e really ?

BERT (*very scornfully*). Naow.

SAM. Gow on !

KEEPER. Of course 'e is. Anyone can see it.

BERT. Don't be silly. Didn't you 'ear 'im say 'e'd go out again.

KEEPER (*tolerantly*). 'E's a bit cracked, that's all. 'E didn't mean it.

SAM. You ought to 'ear my brother-in-law on the subject. W'y, 'e lost the stoppin' out of three teeth along o' the 'ard biscuits, an' 'e's never got the plum pudden wot we posted out to 'im, yet. You ought to 'ear 'im on soldierin'. Mug's game 'e calls it.

BERT. So it is.

KEEPER (*quietly*). Old Scotty's been in the army right enough, Bert, don't you worry.

BERT. I notice 'e don't mention wot regiment 'e belonged to.

SMALL MAN (*triumphantly*). Yes, 'e does. Only the other night w'en 'e was a bit blindo, Second Battalion Keelshire—you know—Scott's Buffs.

SAM (*raising his voice in surprise and ecstasy*). Wot? Oh, nah 'e's done it. Nah we 'ave got 'im! W'y, my bruvver-in-law was in that very regiment—Second Battalion, too, 'an 'e ses as there wasn't a Scotchman in the 'ole battalion except the Colonel.

BERT. There, I told you so.

KEEPER. Your brother-in-law couldn't 'ave known every man in the Battalion. Why, that's nigh a thousand men, isn't it?

SAM. Somethink like it. But every one mentioned it. It was one of his regular jokes in 'is letters 'ome.

KEEPER (*sourly*). Your brother-in-law's too fond o' jokes.

BERT. It'd be a lark to fetch 'im along 'ere and confront old Scotty wiv 'im.

SAM. It'd serve 'im right.

BERT. You owe 'im one for reminding you as your neck wanted washing.

SAM. I could get 'im nah! I knows where 'e goes for 'is drink after the show of a night. Wot's the time?

BERT (*turning and looking at clock in stall*). Nigh on the 'arf 'our.

SAM. I'll catch 'im w'ile 'e's bein' turned out. (*Starts off but stops.*) I say—you'll keep 'im 'ere till I comes back wiv Alf.

BERT. 'E won't get away once I get me ten commandments on 'im.

(SAM *exits hastily.*)

BERT (*gleefully*). Now we'll 'ave a bit o' fun.

KEEPER (*shaking his head regretfully at him*). You've a bad 'eart, Bert.

SMALL MAN. Oh, a naughty, wicked 'eart.

BERT. Are you speaking to me?

SMALL MAN. Yes, please.

BERT. Well, don't.

KEEPER (*gathering in* BERT'S *cup*). Fivepence, please.

BERT. Frippence.

KEEPER. Fivepence.

BERT. 'Ow do you make that out?

KEEPER. Two cawfees, two bread an' butters, packet o' woodbines, and a seed cake.

SMALL MAN (*sadly*). You know that ain't the food for a growin' boy.

BERT. Two cawfees? I only 'ad one.

KEEPER. Wot price your friend?

BERT. That's nothin' to do wiv me.

KEEPER. Come on, now.

BERT. 'E'll be comin' back soon.

KEEPER. Then you can get it back orf 'im w'en 'e does. Come on. (*Holds out his hand determinedly*).

BERT. Oh, you're a shark. (*Hands over coppers*).

SMALL MAN (*in his child-like voice*). Please, sir, if I run 'ome will you pay for me, too?

BERT. I'll pay you. 'Ullo, 'ere's ol' two yards an' arf o' misery. Nah we'll see.

(*The* AUTOCRAT *paces steadily past the stall.*)

SMALL MAN (*under his breath*). There's a sell.

BERT (*hailing the* AUTOCRAT). Ain't you goin' to stop an' 'ave a chat, old man?

AUTOCRAT (*stopping a couple of yards from the*

stall's end). I wasn't thinking of doing any such thing, sir.

BERT. You don't bear any malice agin me for 'avin' disagreed with you, I 'ope. I quite see that you've a right to your opinions, same as I 'ave to mine.

AUTOCRAT. That's a' richt, sir.

BERT. I want to ask you something, but I can't reckerlect wot it was. Perhaps if you'd do me the favour to stop—an' 'ave a cup o' cawfee wi' me, I might be able to think of it.

AUTOCRAT. Thank ye, I've had all the coffee I want this night.

BERT (*reluctantly producing flask*). Per'aps you'd care for a drop o' whisky 'n' water, sir?

AUTOCRAT. Eh? (*Comes to end of stall and accepting flask takes a pull.*) Thank ye.

(BERT *holds out his hand for flask, but the* AUTOCRAT *is tasting the whisky on his tongue and does not notice.*)

BERT (*trying to call attention to his outstretched hand*). I'm sorry it's not Scotch, sir.

AUTOCRAT. It's guid whisky, and guid Irish is no' to be despised. (*Takes another pull.*)

BERT. I *prefer* Irish meself.

AUTOCRAT. Every man to his taste. Here's tae ye. (*Takes a good pull and hands back flask which* BERT *measures with his eye.*) I'm obliged to ye.

BERT. Don't mention it.

AUTOCRAT (*with new geniality*). Noo, what was it ye were wanting to ask me about?

BERT. I can't some'ow reckerlect it. (*With inspiration.*) Somethin' to do wiv soldierin'.

AUTOCRAT (*with a return of his forbidding manner*). I thought ye had a puir opinion of the profession of arms?

BERT. Me? Oh no!

AUTOCRAT. If ye canna think of it I'll be saying guid nicht.

BERT. No, no. Don't gow orf like that. I may think of it any minute. 'Ere, 'ave another drop o' whisky.

AUTOCRAT. Thank ye. (*Takes flask.*)

KEEPER (*aside to* SMALL MAN). We shall be 'avin' 'im like 'e was larst week in a minute.

SMALL MAN. 'Ope 'e doesn't fall on me, that's all.

BERT (*who has been racking his brains for a topic of conversation wherewith to detain the other*). It was—something to do with what you were saying about the spoils of the enemy——

AUTOCRAT. The spoils of the *conquered*, eh ?

BERT (*eagerly*). Yes, that's it.

AUTOCRAT. Well, what about it ? (*Takes another pull at flask, the whisky is beginning to have visible effect upon him. He sways slightly, and his peculiar manner is exaggerated.*)

BERT. Ah, that's it. What do you think about it ?

AUTOCRAT (*seriously*). I'm afraid you're the worse for drink, sir. Ye don't seem able to express yerself coherently.

BERT. I've got it ! Wot's done now to prevent soldiers 'elpin' themselves as you say they should. Wot would be done to a chap as was caught——

AUTOCRAT. Caught looting, eh ? Ah, I can tell ye that. Ye've come to the right man to learn that. General Court Martial, four years' imprisonment and kicked out o' the Service for taking a few ounces of gold and some damn Dutch notes from the bodies o' Britain's enemies, an' a few ounces more from their homes. But that's the way war——

BERT. 'Ere, steady, old man. I only arst out of curiosity—you needn't spit all over me.

AUTOCRAT (*in the same excited vein*). The army's all damn policemen, now. Watching each other to see no one oversteps the mark.

BERT. All right, all right, take it easy. 'Ave a drop more o' my whisky, if there's any left.

AUTOCRAT (*pulling himself together*). Thank ye. I'm a hot-tempered man.

BERT. You are that.

(SAM *returns with another man—the brother-in-law,* ALF *by name, whom he has been to fetch.*)

ALF. W'ich one?

SAM (*as they approach the stall*). The——

ALF. Right, 'ere goes. (*Approaches* AUTOCRAT *softly and slaps him familiarly on the back.*) 'Ullo, old sporty, I 'ear you was with me——

(*The* AUTOCRAT *turns.* ALF, *after one look at him, draws himself up to attention and salutes quietly.*)

ALF. Beg pardon, sir.

AUTOCRAT (*peering into his face*). Sedly, isn't it?

ALF. Yessir.

AUTOCRAT. I'm glad to see ye again. Stand easy. How's yer wife. (*His manner is the friendly officer to the well-disciplined soldier.*)

SEDLY. Rather poorly, sir.

AUTOCRAT. I'm sorry to hear that. (*Turning to* BERT.) I've still got your flask. (*Returns it.*)

SAM (*whispering*). What's up?

SEDLY. Shut your mouth, it's the boss.

SAM. Oo?

SEDLY. The Colonel.

(SAM *indulges in a prolonged whistle. The others look on in dumb wonder.*)

AUTOCRAT (*turning back to his old soldier*). Ye've left the army, I see, Sedly.

SEDLY. Yessir.

AUTOCRAT. Quite right. The army's no place for a man in times like these.

SEDLY (*respectfully*). The Service League wouldn't agree with you, sir.

AUTOCRAT (*hotly*). The Service League want to make us all into policemen. (*More calmly.*) What are ye doing now, Sedly?

SEDLY. Workin' at the Standard Music 'all at present, sir.

AUTOCRAT (*cracking a joke*). Ah, supporting the arts!

SEDLY. But that's only temporary, sir.

AUTOCRAT. Aye?

SEDLY (*with a touch of pride*). Yessir, I'm goin' into the force.

AUTOCRAT (*sharply*). The what?

SEDLY. The force, sir. Police Force.

AUTOCRAT (*with intense scorn, and rising anger*). Ye're going into the police! An old man of mine is going to be a policeman to frighten babies and chase little boys about the park. Man, Sedly, can ye no' find honest work to do?

(SEDLY *stands steady and waits for the storm to pass.*)

AUTOCRAT (*more in surprise than anger*). An' you're the man who would 'a' come back for me at Maarburg! (*Suddenly and furiously.*) I'll tell ye what ye can do when ye're a full-fledged policeman, Sedly. Ye can come along to seventy-two Millbank Street and tak' *me*. Aye! There'll mebbe be some none too pleased to see me, but I'm doon as a wanted man. Ye understand? Ye can arrest *me*, sir, when ye've got your commission, or your warrant, or whatever ye call it. Mebbe ye'll see my picture in your rogues' gallery when ye come to study it. David McLeod, Lieutenant-Colonel, Desertion in time o' war while under arrest an' awaiting Court Martial for looting. Ye'd like to arrest me, Sedly?

SEDLY (*stolidly*). I shouldn't at all, sir, thank yer.

AUTOCRAT. Ye're no a policeman yet, sir, ye'll

have to learn. Ye'll have to learn. An' ye can——

(*His excitement terminates in another burst of coughing.*)

KEEPER (*quietly*). You pop off 'ome, my lad. (*To* SAM.) And take your bloomin' brother-in-law with you.

SAM. I never guessed it was——

KEEPER. Yes, that's all jolly fine. Now pop off.

SAM. Come on, Alf.

SEDLY. 'Arf a mo'. Excuse me, sir—(*the* AUTOCRAT, *still coughing, turns to him*)—I'm sorry you think so bad of me, sir. I don't think I deserve it.

AUTOCRAT (*feebly through his cough*). Ye put you're hand on me like a policeman.

KEEPER (*warningly in background*). Pop off.

SEDLY. Sorry, sir, good night. (*Salutes and exits with* SAM.)

(*All the* AUTOCRAT'S *temper has evaporated, and he stands feebly against the stall. The* KEEPER *looks doubtfully at the* SMALL MAN.)

KEEPER. I wonder if you'd mind seein' 'im 'ome?

BERT. I will.

KEEPER. No, you won't. This is partly your doin'.

BERT. I never thought——

SMALL MAN (*in response to a nod from the* KEEPER). Can I see you 'ome, sir?

AUTOCRAT. Eh? Thank ye, I'm feeling rather tired. (*Takes the other's arm.*) He'll know where to find me, won't he? (*Chuckles feebly.*) Dirty policeman!

BERT. Straight, if I'd known—— (*Shakes his head and is silent.*)

(SEDLY *returns from down* R.)

KEEPER (*looking up*). 'Ullo! Wot 'ave you come back for?

SEDLY (*seriously*). I say, does 'e often go on like that ?

KEEPER. Never 'eard 'im before.

SEDLY. 'Ope to Gawd 'e doesn't or 'e'll be copped.

KEEPER. 'E's really wanted ?

SEDLY. I suppose 'e must be. 'E was under arrest, I know. Serious case. I suppose 'e bolted. 'E was always a bit queer.

BERT (*quietly*). Looks awfully down on 'is luck now, don't 'e ?

SEDLY. Poor old Boss.

BERT (*voicing his thoughts*). 'E owes George 'ere for 'is bit o' supper to-night.

SEDLY. Does 'e ?

(KEEPER *nods.*)

SEDLY (*suddenly placing a shilling on the counter*). 'Ere, take it out o' that. If 'e wants anything else, let 'im 'ave it from me.

BERT (*looking at him curiously*). I believe you're blubbin'.

SEDLY. Well, I've got something to blub about, 'aven't I ?

BERT (*slowly*). Yes. (*After a pause.*) It just shows yer, don't it ?

CURTAIN.

INNOCENT AND ANNABEL

INNOCENT AND ANNABEL

Produced at the Court Theatre, London, on May 19, 1912, with the following cast of characters :—

ACHILLE INNOCENT . .	*Mr. Murri Moncrieff.*
MRS. ACHILLE . . .	*Miss Gillian Scaife.*
ANNABEL . . .	*Miss Agnes Imlay.*
ESTHER	*Miss May Saker.*

INNOCENT AND ANNABEL

At the rise of the curtain MRS. INNOCENT *is discovered seated above the table sewing busily. She is a pretty, capable-looking, little English woman—twenty-eight years old—with soft, light brown hair and grey eyes. She is simply but prettily dressed in a lace blouse and dark skirt, and wears no jewelry except her wedding-ring.* ACHILLE INNOCENT *is at the piano playing and singing when the curtain rises.*

MR. INNOCENT (*after finishing song*). Un peu triste—you think so?

MRS. INNOCENT. For the Turlings? Just a bit.

MR. INNOCENT (*with dolorous abandon*). I shall not do it. Whatever you tell me not to do, I shall not do. Your judgment is parfait.

MRS. INNOCENT (*calmly*). Fiddlesticks. My judgment agrees with yours for once. That's all.

MR. INNOCENT. Ah, now you are the cynic. You know that——

MRS. INNOCENT. I know that you are getting on my nerves. You've been gushing over me for an hour.

MR. INNOCENT. I am sorry. It is my nature to be amiable.

MRS. INNOCENT (*still sewing*). No it isn't. It's your habit, picked up at your everlasting "At Homes."

MR. INNOCENT (*shrugging agreeably*). Per'aps. One must be pleasant to all, or 'oo cares for one's songs? (*Crosses to her.*)

MRS. INNOCENT. No one. It's the way you chatter and smile and pass teacups in between songs that keeps your price up.

MR. INNOCENT. Eh bien. I believe you are right. C'est triste, but I believe you are right. I would rather they loved me for my singing, but—que veux-tu? Since they will not, it is well they love my songs for me.

MRS. INNOCENT (*laughing*). Philosopher.

MR. INNOCENT (*pleased*). Mais oui—je suis philosophe—I 'ope.

MRS. INNOCENT. A very vain one.

MR. INNOCENT. Non, non, non; it is not vanity. I am thinking of the butcher, the baker, and the rent. What does it matter if my little cheque is for singing—"Ninon a Ton Caprice," or for passing the teacup, so that I get it?

MRS. INNOCENT. Do you call that being a philosopher?

MR. INNOCENT. In England, yes. En France—non. En France a philosopher is one 'oo forgets the affairs of 'is 'eart. In England 'e is one 'oo remembers the affairs of his stomach.

MRS. INNOCENT (*drily*). You're getting quite brilliant.

MR. INNOCENT (*pleased*). C'est bien, n'est-ce pas? I am the English philosopher: the French one—non! I would not forget the one affair of my 'eart (*kisses his hand to her*) for t'ousands. (*Crossing to her and bending across table.*)

MRS. INNOCENT. I wish you wouldn't gush so.

MR. INNOCENT (*hurt*). You would not 'ave me be'ave coldly to you?

MRS. INNOCENT. There is such a thing as a happy medium.

MR. INNOCENT (*enthusiastically*). Ah, 'ow true! I am too demonstrative—I love you too well.

MRS. INNOCENT. Oh, dry up.

MR. INNOCENT. You are very 'ard on me. Please

do not keep sitting on me to-day. I am not very 'appy.

MRS. INNOCENT (*cheerfully*). Poor infant. What's the matter?

(INNOCENT *crosses and sits on piano stool.*)

MR. INNOCENT. There is nothing the matter, I 'ope. Only I feel dismal—I feel apprehensive.

MRS. INNOCENT. Apprehensive? What of?

MR. INNOCENT. I do not know. I am not very 'appy.

MRS. INNOCENT. Offended one of your clientele?

MR. INNOCENT (*sadly*). Non, non, non—quite the contrary. (*Sings.*) Cherie——

(MRS. INNOCENT *looks at him inquiringly for a moment, then resumes sewing.*)

Cherie——

MRS. INNOCENT. What is it, dear?

MR. INNOCENT. Qu'est-ce que c'est—"an a—finnity"?

MRS. INNOCENT. What's a what?

MR. INNOCENT (*pronouncing the word unfamiliarly*). An—affinity.

MRS. INNOCENT. An affinity? It's the same in French. Tu dis une affinité, n'est-ce pas?

MR. INNOCENT (*doubtfully*). Oui. I think so. But what does an English lady mean when she say—"we 'ave an affinity"?

MRS. INNOCENT (*scenting trouble*). Why do you want to know?

MR. INNOCENT. Oh, (*shrugging evasively*) c'la ne fait rien. I was just wondering.

MRS. INNOCENT. And what's been happening to make you wonder?

MR. INNOCENT. Nothing. Nothing at all. (*Crossing down to sofa.*)

MRS. INNOCENT. My son, you're far too lazy to wonder about anything out of sheer natural cussed-

ness. (*Putting down work and rising in a business-like way.*) Now, what's up ?

MR. INNOCENT (*with engaging innocence*). "What's up ?" Qu'est-ce que c'est ? (*Sits.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*going to him and sitting beside him on sofa, and sliding her arm through his*). You'd better tell me, Achille. You know you'll have to sooner or later, if you've been getting into a scrape.

MR. INNOCENT. Qu'est-ce que c'est—" a scrape " ?

MRS. INNOCENT (*shaking her head at him*). Oh, you know what a scrape is, my cherub. It's no use pretending you don't.

(MR. INNOCENT *giggles self-consciously.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*severely*). Don't giggle in that conceited way ; it doesn't suit you. The only thing you've got to be conceited about is your good luck in having married a good sensible wife who can pull you out by the hair when you get too hopelessly involved to escape. (*Gives him a little shake and, rising, moves* C. *and looks at him severely.*) You wouldn't be sitting there now chuckling like a baby if you were married to the Tooting Dowager. (*Rises and crosses* L.)

MR. INNOCENT (*stopping his laugh abruptly and looking hurt*). Why do you remind me of 'er ? You know it always gives me the cold shoulder. (*Shivers pathetically.*) I creep !

MRS. INNOCENT. An occasional creep will do you all the good in the world.

MR. INNOCENT (*deeply injured*). You are very 'ard on me. Do you not love me no more ? (*Rises and crosses to her.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*cheerfully, as she returns to her sewing*). I love you much too much, my precious, to enjoy seeing you look a fool. The memory of the Tooting Dowager ought to make you more careful.

MR. INNOCENT (*jumps up and walks about as he protests earnestly*). But I am careful. I do not

encourage nobody. With the Tooting Dowager all I say was—"Madame, you 'ave the beautiful ear," when she admire my singing; and she reply (*intensely*), "Ah, you Frenchmen are so passionate!" (*Pause, then goes on in more complaining tone.*) I 'ad not meant nothing, but if I 'ad not met you and you 'ad not save me she would 'ave married me. Ugh! (*At table.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*sewing coldly*). I'm not sure that if I'd known that I should have to go on rescuing you from pursuing ladies for the rest of my life I shouldn't have let her.

MR. INNOCENT. Oh, cherie! (*Crosses behind table to* L.)

MRS. INNOCENT (*more warmly*). Well, do you think it's pleasant for me? A man of your age ought to be able to refuse an offer of marriage without calling in his wife's assistance. I don't say that you encourage them, but you ought to absolutely *dis*-courage them. Can't you snub them?

MR. INNOCENT. Ah, no. I 'ave not the snub. It is not in my nature. That is why I love you. *You* are the snub personified!

MRS. INNOCENT. Well, can't you be more careful in the first place, then?

MR. INNOCENT. Cherie, indeed—indeed I try to be most careful at all the time. All the time while I talk to a lady I keep saying—"she love me, she love me not." I watch for the first sign—but it is always a different first sign, and I do not reco'nize it. I sing—I am introduce—I try to be'ave polite—and—b'ff! I am entangle!

MRS. INNOCENT. M'yes. It's that politeness that does it. You don't know enough English to be polite with impunity. In a strange language it is wiser to be cold and distant.

MR. INNOCENT. But I cannot be cold and distant! I must be gallant! To a woman it is improper for a Frenchman to be otherwise, and ma profession

demand la politesse! I do not sing well enough to be cold and distant.

MRS. INNOCENT. You sing very nicely.

MR. INNOCENT. So do many others who are also mos' polite. To be cold and distant I should 'ave to sing better than any of them.

MRS. INNOCENT. Well, the alternative is to improve your English.

MR. INNOCENT (*crossing below table to* C.). We should be ruin! In England I am a wit. Pourquoi? Because I speak the bad English. I say things with an airre without knowing that which is to 'appen next, and the effect is sometimes funny. En France I am consider dull—a bore. I make jokes. In England I make no jokes. I only raise my eye and say, "Oh, la la!" ou "Hello!" comme un Anglais, et chaqu'un rit! C'est trés simple. In England all the Frenchmen are wits unless they speak the too good English.

MRS. INNOCENT. Then I suppose you will go on getting into hot water and yelling for me to come and pull you out until one day I shall get tired of it, and then some new edition of the Tooting Dowager will come along and carry you off. That is unless you overcome your natural politeness enough to dissuade her. But you won't. You'll be far too polite.

MR. INNOCENT. Oh, cherie!

MRS. INNOCENT. Well, wouldn't you be too polite? You know perfectly that if one of these unexpected successes of yours turned up now and ordered you to fly with her you would reply—"Oui, Madame. Certainement. 'Ow nice!"

MR. INNOCENT. I should tell her I 'ad a wife *'oo* I loved.

MRS. INNOCENT (*drily*). Yes. The *last* one you said that to thought you were proposing to her.

MR. INNOCENT. I say it more distinctly now. I say—"Madame, I 'ave a wife." Comme ça!

MRS. INNOCENT (*laughing*). To every one?

MR. INNOCENT. To everyone 'oo make me at all nervous.

MRS. INNOCENT (*quietly*). How about the latest ?

MR. INNOCENT (*wondering*). Which latest ?

MRS. INNOCENT. This one who has been talking to you about affinities.

MR. INNOCENT (*laughing self-consciously*). Oh—la dame des affinités——

MRS. INNOCENT (*drily*). Oh yes ; I knew there was a "dame des affinités." You needn't chuckle in that idiotic way. I told you you'd have to tell me about her and you have. Now, then—how far has she got ?

MR. INNOCENT (*reassuringly*). Oh, elle n'est pas dangereuse. (*Pauses.*) At least, I 'ope not. (*Sits on sofa.*)

MRS. INNOCENT. Which means that you aren't as certain as you'd like to be.

MR. INNOCENT (*confidentially*). I confess I am not very 'appy. She make me feel nervous, and yet I know not why. She was not at all charmante.

MRS. INNOCENT (*scathing*). Are any of them ?

MR. INNOCENT (*enthusiastically*). Ah, oui ! The little dark one—with the eyes.

MRS. INNOCENT (*pulling him up*). Achille !

MR. INNOCENT (*falling back into his subdued mood*). But this one is not so. On the contrary, she is mos' clever.

MRS. INNOCENT (*raising her eyebrows*). Clever ?

MR. INNOCENT. Mais oui ! She talk continuously of the mos' wonderful things.

MRS. INNOCENT. What sort of things ?

MR. INNOCENT (*shaking his head*). I could not properly understand her.

MRS. INNOCENT. You couldn't understand her ?

MR. INNOCENT. Non.

MRS. INNOCENT (*significantly*). And you say she's not dangerous.

MR. INNOCENT (*rising nervously*). I say, I 'ope not. She make me uncomfortable, I know not why.

MRS. INNOCENT. Did you fire off the "Madame, I have a wife," at her?

MR. INNOCENT (*rising, proudly*). Oui. "Madame," I say (*with great determination*), "Madame, I 'ave a WIFE!" Comme ça!

MRS. INNOCENT. And what did she say to that?

MR. INNOCENT. She say, "Ah, yes, poor fellow, you would have."

MRS. INNOCENT. Oh! Nice sympathetic person.

MR. INNOCENT (*hastily*). Mais non. Trés antipathique! A lady with the 'ard eye, and the forbidden manner.

MRS. INNOCENT. But she talked about affinities?

MR. INNOCENT (*vaguely*). I think so. Yes.

MRS. INNOCENT. Who was she?

MR. INNOCENT (*shrugging*). Je ne sais pas. One 'oo visit chez Crabtree.

MRS. INNOCENT. Weren't you introduced?

MR. INNOCENT. Very likely. But I am introduce to so many. I am so polite to so many. So many admire my singing. "Wot the charming song you sing?" say one. "Do you like to sing?" say another. "Nice day," "'Ow do you do?" "Wot beautiful children!" "Not that one it has the sugar."—En effet, cherie, après que j'ai chanté, I—I (*with a diving gesture*), I plonge into the fog! (*Gesticulating energetically.*) I am sitting on a sofa beside Madame So-and-So with the chins, being instructed 'ow to grow the "dear little Japonaises trees." I pass the tea-cup to Miss So-and-So with the elbows. I fall over the robe of Miss Somebody-else. I say "Pardon" to Miss So-and-So. I say "'Ow nice" to somebody another. I say "Nice day" *several* times. I say "Nice piano" to my 'ostess et—et puis—bonsoir!

(*Electric bell rings.*)

Tu attends quelqu'un?

MRS. INNOCENT (*looking up at clock on mantelpiece*). No one, unless Clara comes over for a cup of tea.

MR. INNOCENT. I like Clara—— (*Hesitates as if he has more to say.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*lightly*). Yes, she's a good sort, isn't she?

MR. INNOCENT (*sitting down and putting out his hand palm uppermost towards his wife*). But I would rather 'ave tea together—just you and I.

MRS. INNOCENT (*looking at him and putting her hand affectionately in his*). So would I, dear.

MR. INNOCENT (*simply brimming with emotion*). You will not snub me if I say I love you?

MRS. INNOCENT. Why should I, dear.

MR. INNOCENT. You do snub me sometimes.

MRS. INNOCENT (*smiling*). Do I?

MR. INNOCENT. You do not think that I love any of these ladies 'oo——

MRS. INNOCENT. Good heavens, no, boy.

MR. INNOCENT. But you are sometimes vexed over them?

MRS. INNOCENT. I don't like people to think they've made a success with you naturally.

(*Door handle rattles. They draw apart. He rises and goes up stage behind table. A neat servant enters with a card on tray which she carries to* MRS. INNOCENT.)

MRS. INNOCENT (*taking card and looking at it in doubt*). Does she want to see me?

ESTHER. She said Mrs. Annosong, M'am. (*Leaves tray on table.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*reading*). "Mrs. Annabel Wells, The Retreat, Finchley." Do you know her?

MR. INNOCENT (*without interest*). Non.

MRS. INNOCENT. Are you quite sure she wants to see me, Esther?

ESTHER. She said Mrs. Annosong, M'am.

MRS. INNOCENT (*regretfully as she looks again at*

clock). Then I suppose—yes, show her in. Keep tea back until she's gone.

(*Exit* ESTHER, R.)

MR. INNOCENT. Qui est-elle ?

MRS. INNOCENT. I've no idea. It's very tiresome.

MR. INNOCENT. "Mrs. Annabel Wells." Non, je ne la connais pas. (*Reads again.*) "Mrs.—Ann—a—bel—Wells." Non.

(*Enter* ESTHER.)

ESTHER (*announces*). Mrs. Wells, M'am.

(*Exit* ESTHER.)

(*Visitor enters and ignores* MRS. INNOCENT *who has risen.*)

(*She is a firm-looking woman of forty-five with an aggressive manner, and an esoteric nose. Dressed expensively, but very badly, and wearing a large quantity of jewelry. She makes rather a business of moving about, and something about her figure suggests Banting. She marches up to* INNOCENT, *and, taking him by the hand, raises him to his feet. Still holding him by the hand, and fixing his gaze with her eye, she speaks with a deliberate soulfulness quite terrible to hear.*)

MRS. WELLS. You are here.

MR. INNOCENT (*busy with card, etc.*). Oui, Madame, 'ow nice. (*Looking very unhappy.*)

MRS. WELLS. I knew I should find you here.

MR. INNOCENT (*amiably*). Oui—c'est mon adresse.

MRS. WELLS. You knew I should come ?

MR. INNOCENT (*politely and vaguely*). Non, non, non, not in the least. Allow me to—— (*Makes feeble gesture of introduction with left hand without removing his gaze from the visitor's face.*)

MRS. WELLS (*severely*). You did not know ? You must have known.

MR. INNOCENT (*enthusiastically*). Oui—ah, oui! Yes. Certainement! Of course! Allow me to introduce (*with great emphasis*) MY WIFE.

MRS. WELLS (*takes a couple of steps forward, and studies* MRS. INNOCENT *closely and curiously*). You are his wife. I wish to see you.

MRS. INNOCENT (*drily*). So I understood.

MR. INNOCENT (*seizing the opportunity*). Je me retire pendant votre interview. Excuse me. (*Bows himself politely towards door.*)

MRS. WELLS (*wagging a chiding finger in his direction*). Ah, coward—coward! But what man is not? You fear to face things out—all of you.

MR. INNOCENT (*agreeably*). Oui, Madame—deesgusting. Excuse me.

(*Exit* INNOCENT, R.)

MRS. WELLS (*turns her gaze on* MRS. INNOCENT, *whom she studies with passive amazement. Speaking at last*). And YOU are his wife!

MRS. INNOCENT (*quietly*). I think you said you wished to see me.

MRS. WELLS (*after a moment's scrutiny*). Yes. It is best.

MRS. INNOCENT (*indicating chair* R. *of table*). Will you sit down?

MRS. WELLS. Thank you. (*Sits* R. *of table. Still regards* MRS. INNOCENT *fixedly, and repeats with growing surprise.*) And YOU are his wife!

MRS. INNOCENT. You've said that before.

MRS. WELLS (*stopping her with one hand, and speaking dictatorially*). You must not think me rude. There is nothing rude in my mental composition. (*Pauses, then inquires in a different tone.*) You are not a Perfect Liver?

MRS. INNOCENT. I beg your pardon.

MRS. WELLS (*distinctly*). I say, you are not a Perfect Liver?

MRS. INNOCENT (*half amused and half amazed*). No—not that I know of.

MRS. WELLS (*with conviction*). Ah, then you do NOT understand.

MRS. INNOCENT (*candidly*). No, I don't.

MRS. WELLS (*helpfully*). I am the Vice-President.

MRS. INNOCENT. I'm afraid that doesn't make it any clearer.

MRS. WELLS. We are a small band, but an earnest one. It would be doing us no more than justice to admit that we try? (*Pauses for a reply, and getting none, inquires.*) You have never heard of us?

MRS. INNOCENT. Never.

MRS. WELLS (*quite satisfied*). Of course not! "Vita non Verba" is our motto. Our aim is to live our lives as perfectly—as we can see our way to live them, untrammelled by convention, superstition, or—or anything of that sort. We have our failures, but—we TRY.

MRS. INNOCENT. Yes, very nice. And has this anything to do with your visit?

MRS. WELLS. Oh, DEAR no! I merely mentioned it.

MRS. INNOCENT. Oh, I see. And what is the subject of your visit?

MRS. WELLS. You have my card?

MRS. INNOCENT. Yes.

MRS. WELLS. My name is not familiar to you?

MRS. INNOCENT. No.

MRS. WELLS (*helpfully*). Perhaps my last name—Mrs. Bertram Tilbury. I am a widow—once removed.

MRS. INNOCENT (*raising her eyebrows*). Once removed?

MRS. WELLS. Yes. Bertram and I parted, and were re-married, respectively, before his death. There were faults on both sides.

MRS. INNOCENT. I'm sure there must have been.

MRS. WELLS. You do NOT know the name?

MRS. INNOCENT. No, I don't.

MRS. WELLS. I thought you might have heard it. Bertram shot himself (*pause*) recently owing to the elopement of his second wife with Mr. Walter Petty Wells—my brother-in-law—the President of the Perfect Livers.

MRS. INNOCENT. Oh, so you are all Perfect Livers?

MRS. WELLS. Except Bertram. He gave it up just before he shot himself. But I stray from the point.

MRS. INNOCENT. Yes, you seem to. As my time is of value (*rises and goes* L.) would you mind saying why you wished to see me?

MRS. WELLS. Has the poor fellow told you nothing?

MRS. INNOCENT (*sharply*). What poor fellow?

MRS. WELLS (*speaking indulgently to herself*). No. Of course. He wouldn't have. Men are such pitiful cowards. (*To* MRS. INNOCENT.) They cause nine-tenths of this world's misery by their incapacity for facing unpleasant facts and speaking unpleasant truths. WE are not like that, are we, Mrs. Anosong? At least; I know I am not, and you, I am sure, would never shirk the truth—however terrible.

MRS. INNOCENT. No?

MRS. WELLS (*with conviction*). No, never; you wrong yourself if you say you would.

MRS. INNOCENT. And what particular unpleasant truth do you want me to face now? (*Sits.*)

MRS. WELLS (*leaning her elbows on table, and speaking with intense earnestness*). Mrs. Anosong, I love your husband, and your husband WORSHIPS me.

MRS. INNOCENT (*weakly*). Oh!

MRS. WELLS. It is too late for remonstrances. There is between us an *affinity*. We only met yesterday afternoon.

MRS. INNOCENT. At the Crabtree's "At Home."

MRS. WELLS. You know?

MRS. INNOCENT. I know that he met an—affinity

at the Crabtrees, but I wasn't aware that you were she.

MRS. WELLS. He did not tell you my name ?

MRS. INNOCENT. No—he didn't. I see now that he described you——

MRS. WELLS. But he feared to tell you my name. (*Again communing indulgently with herself.*) Oh, coward—coward ! How weak ! How utterly weak !

MRS. INNOCENT (*with interest*). You think he should have given me full particulars ?

MRS. WELLS. It would have been the brave—the STRONG thing to do, but—do you know—all my affinities have been weak, weak men.

MRS. INNOCENT (*drily*). I can quite believe it.

MRS. WELLS (*with some doubts as to the other's meaning*). Like attracts unlike, you think ?

MRS. INNOCENT. You'll excuse me, but really I don't see what good you've done by coming to me.

MRS. WELLS (*shocked*). You don't see what good I have done ? I have saved you from occupying a false and invidious position. I am not the woman to let a fellow creature occupy such a position through fear of worldly censure. What is the world ? I despise it.

MRS. INNOCENT (*quietly*). Yes, of course. So do I. So does everybody. Still, I don't see where the false and invidious position comes in.

MRS. WELLS (*coldly*). Your views may differ from mine, but I should say that you would be in an extremely false position if you held your husband after what I've told you.

MRS. INNOCENT (*enlightened*). Oh, I see. You think I ought to hand him over ?

MRS. WELLS. Well——

MRS. INNOCENT (*with childlike glee*). You make your case so clear one can almost read your thoughts. (*Adopting a dangerously affable manner.*) So you found out your affinity at the Crabtrees ? (*Gushing.*) How nice for both of you ! Which of you found it out first ?

MRS. WELLS (*not without suspicion that the other one is getting at her*). HE found it out first, but I was the first to mention it.

MRS. INNOCENT. Then how do you know that he was the first to find it out ?

MRS. WELLS (*aggressively*). He told me so.

MRS. INNOCENT (*inviting confidence*). Oh ? (*She rises quietly and lifts bowl of sweet-pea blossoms from table.*)

MRS. WELLS (*still aggressively*). I asked him, " Did you not feel at once the affinity that drew us together ? " and he replied, flushing brightly (*putting much soulfulness into* INNOCENT'S *stock phrase*), " Are we ? Certainement—'ow nice ! " (*Looks at* MRS. INNOCENT *with dull suspicion.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*snorts and hastily replaces bowl on table and covers her face with her handkerchief. It is some time before she can regain her composure.* MRS. WELLS *eyes her with dull suspicion, but* MRS. INNOCENT *reassures her with a dumb shaking of the head, at last managing to ejaculate, still choking with laughter*). I beg your pardon—it's nothing, really. Sweet-peas always make me sneeze, and those are exceptionally peppery ones. Please go on. Is that all ?

MRS. WELLS. Oh, dear no—we talked for HOURS !

MRS. INNOCENT (*carrying flowers across behind her visitor to the piano*). Did he mention me ?

MRS. WELLS. Ah, yes—poor fellow ! And I could have wept when he did so. " Madame," he said, while he clenched his hands to keep his voice from shaking—" Madame, I have a wife." (*Turns and sees* MRS. INNOCENT *apparently overcome with emotion. Is intensely gratified.*) Ah, it was indeed pitiful. I knew then how it would rend your heart to know it, and resolved to tell you at once. If you had heard him you would have vowed then and there not to hold him another moment against his will. It would be a crime. (*Pauses for a reply,*

and getting none, speaks more sharply.) You agree with me?

MRS. INNOCENT (*without looking up*). Oh yes, quite!

MRS. WELLS (*not quite reassured*). You are a very sensible woman.

MRS. INNOCENT. Thank you.

MRS. WELLS. Some women would have resented my outspokenness. You see that it is kindest.

MRS. INNOCENT (*looking up and mopping her eyes*). Oh, certainly. It robs the situation of all its seriousness.

MRS. WELLS (*not understanding the remark, and accordingly resenting it*). I beg your pardon? You do not doubt me? (*Sits on sofa.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*more composedly, rises*). It would be unwomanly to doubt my husband's falseness. (*Jumping up suddenly and effusively.*) Won't you stop to tea? (*Crossing to bell.*)

MRS. WELLS. I scarcely—— (*Rises.*)

MRS. INNOCENT. Oh, please do! You don't know the pleasure it would give me to see you and Achille together.

MRS. WELLS (*nonplussed*). I'm afraid you do not understand. (*Crosses to her.*) I cannot encourage you to hope that our affinity is of a platonic nature.

MRS. INNOCENT (*brightly as she goes to bell above fire-place and rings it*). Oh no, I'm sure it's not. I know Achille too well. He is far too single-minded to have more than one *platonic* affection in his life, and that I *know* is for me. Besides (*more lightly*) these things have happened so often before.

MRS. WELLS (*stunned*). Before? (*Sits* R. *of table.*)

(ESTHER *enters* R.)

MRS. INNOCENT (*briskly*). Tea, Esther. Oh—and tell your master that I should like him to please come in.

ESTHER. Yes, ma'am.

(ESTHER *exits* R.)

(MRS. INNOCENT *busily gathers sewing into workbox. Sits* L. *of table.*)

MRS. WELLS. I did not catch what you said. Did you say that—things of this sort had happened before ?

MRS. INNOCENT. Oh yes, often. Poor Achille—he is so volatile. You are quite right about keeping him against his will. I never attempt such a thing, and he always comes back to me.

MRS. WELLS (*horrified*). Comes back ?

(*Enter* ESTHER *with tea-things. Crosses to table* L.C. *and puts down tray.*)

ESTHER. If you please, ma'am, Master's compliments and this is 'er !

MRS. WELLS. What does he mean by that ?

ESTHER. And he would rather not come in to tea, if you don't mind.

MRS. INNOCENT. Oh, but I do ! Please tell him that I shall be most disappointed if he doesn't.

(*Exit* ESTHER R.)

MRS. WELLS. What does he mean by " this is 'er " ? (*Looks suspiciously at* MRS. INNOCENT.)

MRS. INNOCENT. I presume he means that you are she—the affinity that he has been telling me about, you know.

(MR. INNOCENT *enters, glancing an inquiring glance at his wife, who busies herself with the tea-things and refuses to meet his eye.*)

MR. INNOCENT. You 'ave liked, to meet my wife—yes ? She—she 'as told you——?

MRS. WELLS. She has told me much. Mr. Innocent, tell me truly—have—things like this—ever come into your life before ?

MR. INNOCENT (*catching at the word*, C.). Before ? Oh oui ! 'Eaps of times. It is nothing.

(MRS. WELLS *is dumbfounded.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*watching them*). You two ought to get on well together. You are both so outspoken. Where shall you elope to ?

MR. INNOCENT (*startled*). Elope ? (*Behind table.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*sweetly*). Mrs. Annabel Wells is going to elope with you, dear ; didn't you know ? Where shall you go to—Italy ?

MRS. WELLS. Mr. Anosong had suggested Italy, but now that I know——

MRS. INNOCENT (*running on*). I wonder if it would be worth Achille's while to take a return ticket.

MRS. WELLS (*glaring at her*). A return ticket ? What for ?

MRS. INNOCENT. To come back with, of course. Sugar ?

MRS. WELLS (*wrathfully*). How DARE you offer me sugar ?

MRS. INNOCENT (*taking it out again*). *No* sugar.

MRS. WELLS. How dare you, I say, (*bursting into tears*) sit there—and—offer me—sugar ?—in that cold-blooded way. After all I've done for you, too !

MRS. INNOCENT. After what ?

MRS. WELLS. After all I've done for you ! After my treating you as one woman should treat another ! I might have kept our affinity to myself—but did I ? No, I came to you openly and told you ALL. (*Furiously.*) Didn't I tell you all ?

MRS. INNOCENT. I believe so.

MRS. WELLS (*rises and goes* C.). When a man falls in love with a married WOMAN—what does he do ?

MRS. INNOCENT. Really, I suppose he is governed by circumstances.

MRS. WELLS (*weeping and explaining*). Does he hide the fact—as a woman would? No. He goes to the woman's husband and he says: (*with an attempt at imitation*) "Dash it, old man, I love your wife. I'm sorry for you, but there you are! We're up against it. You're a man of the world. So am I!"

MRS. INNOCENT. Is that what he says? Really? How interesting.

MRS. WELLS. I've always said that women should be as straight with each other as men are. (*Breaking down again.*) And after I've come to you and told you ALL, and put the case before you—you would have let me fall into a Blue-Beard's net without one word of warning. Have you no pity for your husband's victims?

MRS. INNOCENT (*brightly*). Oh yes, I'm often most sorry for them, poor things.

MRS. WELLS (*snorting*). Sorry for them! And you let them fall, and suggest that that MONSTER (*pointing to the mystified* INNOCENT) shall take a return ticket!

MRS. INNOCENT. Yes, of course—why not? I want him back, you know. There is between us an affinity.

MRS. WELLS (*suddenly—but without rising*). Let me go! (*Sits* R. *of table.*) The door—where is the door?

MR. INNOCENT (*anxious to be useful*). The door, madame. First on the right.

MRS. WELLS (*shrinking back from* INNOCENT). No, no! Do not come near me! Do not touch me!

MR. INNOCENT (*standing still, surprised*). No?

MRS. WELLS (*still seated*). Stand back! Do not seek to detain me!

MR. INNOCENT (*reassuringly*). Certainly not, madame, certainly not.

MRS. WELLS (*getting on her feet at last*). It would be useless. I am stronger far than you.

MR. INNOCENT (*in extreme terror*). Stronger than me ?

MRS. WELLS (*with conviction*). Good is always stronger than evil.

MR. INNOCENT (*reassured*). Ah, oui. 'Ow nice !

MRS. WELLS (*moving towards* MRS. INNOCENT). I am going.

MRS. INNOCENT. Good-bye.

(MRS. WELLS *gives* MRS. INNOCENT *a chilling glance, and stalks to the door.* INNOCENT *opens the door politely—she shudders and draws back, but recovers her self-command, and looks him fearlessly in the face for a moment.*)

MRS. WELLS. And I thought you such a good man ! (*More in sorrow than in anger.*)

(*Exit with much dignity. Re-entering almost immediately.*)

(MR. INNOCENT *looks after* MRS. WELLS *in mystified silence—closes door and turns towards his wife.*)

MRS. INNOCENT (*stands above tea-table looking at him humorously*). (*Answering his look.*) Well ?

MR. INNOCENT (*still near the door*). The—lady—what—was——

(MRS. WELLS *flings open door again and stands on the threshold ; is furious. Glares at* MRS. INNOCENT.)

MRS. WELLS. Would you mind telling me the way out of this flat ? I have already opened the doors of the bathroom, the servant's bedroom, and what I presume is the coal-cellar.

MRS. INNOCENT (*ringing bell*). I'm sorry. Esther !

ESTHER (*off*). Yes'm ?

MRS. INNOCENT. Show Mrs. Wells out.

(MRS. WELLS *gives a parting glance and exits.*)